**Intergenerational Incarceration: Risk Factors and Social Exclusion**

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**Abstract**

This study analyses the intergenerational transmission of incarceration in a sample of youth from a Michigan study of youth sentenced to juvenile facilities and adult prisons. The social exclusion framework from Murray (2007) was used to examine the correlates of parental incarceration for youth who themselves are incarcerated. Cluster analysis identified ten factors that showed significant differences among low, medium and high rates of parental incarceration. The factors were associated with negative life events, parental substance abuse, experience with public assistance and/or foster care, neighborhood quality and instability, stigma, and negative youth outcomes. The results point to the complexity of the problems associated with intergenerational incarceration and the need for policy changes and further research to address this growing problem.

**Intergenerational Incarceration: Risk Factors and Social Exclusion**

Introduction [[1]](#endnote-1)

Evidence is mounting that the mass incarceration policies in the United States are having many long term unintended negative consequences, but one issue that has received relatively little attention in the U.S. is the impact on children of having incarcerated parents (Western and Wildman, 2009). Over 1.7 million children, nearly 2% of the U.S. child population, have a parent in prison, having increased 80% from 1991 (Glaze and Maruschak, 2009; Eddy and Poehlmann, 2010). In addition, it is estimated that 10 million children in the U.S. have had a parent or sibling who has been incarcerated (The Sentencing Project, 2007). Wildeman (2009) estimates that by age fourteen 50% of African American children born in 1990 to a high school dropout had an imprisoned father.

What are the outcomes for these juveniles whose parents were incarcerated? Research in this area has shown that crime runs in families. The probability that forcible separation of children and parents could be expected to have long term negative consequences was noted by Bowlby in his studies of early childhood (1946 & 1973). Pre-existing instability and dysfunctional parenting are identified as factors in negative outcomes for these youth (Robins, West and Herjanic, 1975; McCord, 2007; Braman and Wood, 2003; Kinnear et. al., 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2008). At the same time, separate sets of literature evidence the highly disadvantaged family and neighborhood origins of incarcerated populations (Testa and Furstenberg, 2002; Western and Wildeman, 2009; Ng, 2010; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010). Often the social and economic conditions in these neighborhoods do not change substantially from those experienced by their parents. These results imply that an incarcerated youth who has a parent with an incarceration history will likely be one who has experienced and will continue to experience various types of disadvantages that greatly hinder any chance of reintegration to society or success in life. The implications are sobering, especially in the light of mass imprisonment in the United States and the perpetuation of the effects on future generations.

This paper examines the extent to which various risk factors of a sample of youth in juvenile and adult correctional facilities in Michigan are related to having a parent who had been incarcerated. The youth themselves were experiencing a similar fate in either juvenile or adult prison facilities. Applying cluster analysis to a framework of social exclusion developed by Murray (2007), sample youth were grouped according to prevalence rates of parental incarceration and types of social exclusion. These factors included pre-existing family deprivations, loss of material and social capital, stigma, linguistic disadvantage, and dynamic exclusion.

Prior to the cluster analysis, a descriptive comparison is presented according to whether sample youth had a parent who is incarcerated. The final section ends with suggested intervention and research agendas to reduce intergenerational incarceration in the light of the findings.

**Literature Review**

Findings from longitudinal studies by Farrington, Coid and Murray(2009) and their colleagues at Cambridge University along with work by Bijleveld and Wijkman (2009) and Van De Rakt et. al. (2009) of the Netherlands support the transmission of offending behavior from fathers to sons, for three generations in the case of the Cambridge University Study and for five generations in a Netherlands’ samples, although the results in the latter study were less strong and consistent. Murray and Farrington (2005) noted that l0% of the families generated 64% of all delinquent acts, along with an odds ratio of 5.7 for antisocial behavior by the child of an incarcerated parent. More recently Glaze and Maruschak (2009) report that half of the parents in state prisons reported that they had a family member who had been incarcerated, most often a father or a brother. Racial differences in all of these studies are pronounced with children of color significantly overrepresented in this population.

Explanations of the intergenerational transmission of offending have included lack of parental supervision, particularly in families where both parents are incarcerated (Kim, Capaldi, et. al.(2009); Thornberry, et. al.(2009). Parental imprisonment was also identified as a risk marker because of its stigmatizing effects on children, family instability and poverty, and the problematic conditions in which children of incarcerated parents are reared. These youth experience high levels of homelessness, incomplete education, and social exclusion from adequate housing, health care and active political participation (Murray and Farrington, 2005).

Besides effects of parental incarceration on the children’s own offending, research have also explored effects on other outcomes. Children of prisoners were found to experience problems prior to and during their parent(s) incarceration, including depression, hyperactivity, aggression, withdrawal, sleep and eating disorders, truancy and poor school performance, as well as conduct disorders (Parke and Stewart, 2003; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Comfort, 2007; and Murray & Farrington, 2008). The trauma of separation may result in lifelong harm to parental attachment for children, who may develop maladaptive coping patterns and conduct problems such as sexual acting out, substance abuse and delinquency (Bernstein, 2005). In a study of adolescents receiving mental health services, Phillips, et. al. (2002) found that 43% had a parent who had been incarcerated. Parental incarceration also has indirect negative effects on children as they are subjects to various forms of social control, invasion of their privacy or discrimination. Comfort (2007) refers to these unintended consequences as “secondary prisonization” which may well be major factors in their future difficulty in successful normative adaptation. Foster and Hagen (2007) observed that children of incarcerated fathers are at lifelong risk for homelessness, poor health and lack of education.

To “capture the multiple pathways that might link parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children” (p.56), Murray (2007) conceptualized seven types of ‘social exclusion’ experienced by prisoners and their families. For our study focused on the incarcerated offspring of prisoners and ex-prisoners, the perspective is slightly different. In particular, we found five of the seven categories of social exclusion helpful in framing our examination of the relationship between parental incarceration and other risk conditions experienced by sample youth.

First, Murray (2007) asserted that prisoners and their families experience pre-existing exclusion; they seem to have the most disadvantaged backgrounds even before imprisonment. Such background deprivations included unemployment, low social class, multiple health problems, and marital conflict.

Second, Murray highlighted the loss of material and social capital following imprisonment. Incarceration triggers loss of income, additional costs of visiting and providing for the family member in prison, and difficulty finding employment post-incarceration due to a prison record. In addition, social capital loss arises from remaining caregivers of children having to increase work hours, and becoming more stressed. Families might also have to move house and children move schools. At the community level, Murray also highlighted the increase of social disorganization in communities with high rates of imprisonment.

The third exclusion, stigma, might be experienced as a result of parental incarceration, such as needing to adapt to new schools and neighborhoods and verbal abuse from children at old schools. Stigma might also be experienced due to pre-existing disadvantages such as poor mental health, low social status, or poor academic performance.

Fourth, ‘dynamic’ exclusion refers to reduced future opportunities for children, which parental incarceration and the related exclusions experienced before, during, and after parents’ incarceration might result in. Examples of these included mental health problems, poor familial relationships, substance abuse, and children’s own delinquency and imprisonment.

The last three exclusions were related to institutions. Linguistic exclusion related to parents’ or children’s ineffective participation in court processing; political exclusion referred to ex-prisoners not having voting rights or other rights to participate in governmental decision making affecting their children; and administrative exclusion arise because children of incarcerated parents tend to be excluded by the state, for instance in official reports or national statistics. Murray makes the point under administrative exclusion that there is a dearth of information and studies on children of prisoners, rendering them ‘invisible’ to the general society.

In research, the distinction between pre-existing and post-incarceration exclusion is often unclear. Unless studies ask specifically about disadvantages and exclusions resulting from incarceration, material and social capital exclusions are often analyzed as independent effects of parental incarceration. For example, McCord (2007) attributed criminal behavior to a variety of socialization experiences including exposure to parental substance abuse, low maternal affection, poor supervision, family conflict, punitive parental discipline and parental incarceration. Absence of the father was an important factor in delinquency and crime, especially in situations where maternal affection was low or ineffectual.

Similarly, while Murray identified increased social disorganization in a community as a result high imprisonment rates, neighborhood studies have often showed the criminogenic influences of economically and socially disadvantaged neighborhoods without necessarily relating disorganized neighborhoods to high imprisonment. What is clear in the evidence is that disorganized neighborhoods with low social capital have higher crime rates and other anti-social behavior (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon- Rowley, 2002; Ng, 2010). In their examination of the social ecology of delinquency, Testa and Furstenberg (2002) highlight the interconnections between early childhood development, adolescent delinquency and community context. Their work in Chicago builds on the early research of Breckenridge and Abbott (1912) and Shaw and McKay (1942) in the Chicago Area Project which showed that over a period of more than a half century the same neighborhoods in Chicago have high rates of child neglect and abuse, poverty, single parenthood and delinquency.

In summary, Murray’s taxonomy of social exclusion provides a good starting framework for the different ways parental incarceration relates to children’s incarceration. It therefore provides research with a helpful organization to analyze different social exclusions and intergenerational incarceration. However it might not be possible to classify social exclusions neatly according to Murray’s taxonomy in a single study. Murray classified the types of exclusion by a time dimension of pre-, post-, an future consequences of parental incarceration; and secondly, by institutions. In fact, as shown in the review in this section, many studies analyzed the factors discussed by Murray without necessarily typifying them the way Murray did. A study that does follow closely Murray’s taxonomy will require following families longitudinally from before a member’s incarceration to adult outcomes of the member’s offspring. Such a study will also need to query subjects on not only economic and social experiences, but also experiences with the criminal justice system and with political and community participation.

Analytic Strategy

This study of intergenerational incarceration was an offshoot of a larger research project that was designed to assess the variable preparation of juveniles in the juvenile system for community return versus similar youth sentenced to the adult system in Michigan. On examining the data, very high levels of intergenerational incarceration were observed among these youth. This then led to the present investigation of whether and how parental incarceration of this sample of incarcerated youth is related to other negative backgrounds and experiences of the youth.

Murray’s social exclusions were found to be a helpful framework, and the survey contained many of the exclusion factors in Murray. Not all the factors were available in the data, however, and these included the institution-related factors in political and administration exclusion. To a large extent, these macro-level factors are not directly relevant to our understanding of the individual youth inmate at the time that they were being surveyed. Murray’s time-based classification was also adapted into a cross-sectional snapshot of incarcerated youths who answered questions about their backgrounds retrospectively. Hence, it is not possible to identify whether some factors were pre-existing or a result of parental incarceration.

The baseline condition is that the prevalence rates of the exclusion factors and parental incarceration are high among the sample of incarcerated youth. The question is whether the youth who had incarcerated parents also experienced more of the exclusion factors.

# Methods and Data

The data was from interviews conducted with a sample of 48 youth leaving juvenile facilities and 50 youth leaving adult prisons. They were identified by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Corrections respectively as individuals who were expected to be released from their respective facilities within six months. In the l990s Michigan implemented laws to waive juveniles more easily to adult prison sites. Some counties utilized these provisions to commit many youth to adult programs whereas other counties sent few or none, and instead retained their youth in the juvenile justice system (Shook & Sarri, 2008).



The juvenile sample included youth who were residing briefly in five halfway houses following an average of three years of placement in closed institutions of the Department of Human Services. The Department was responsible for preparing these youth for release, along with an additional fourteen who were referred directly from the two state training Schools. All cases were identified as meeting the criteria of being readied for release. Their median number of out-of-home prior placements was five. Their median age of entry into the juvenile facilities for the crime that led to their most recent stay was 15.8 years, but many had been in placement for the majority of their teen age years, although none had been placed in an adult facility. The median age of this group at the time of the interview was 18.1 years (range=16-20).

The interviews with youth in adult prisons were conducted in eight different prisons in Michigan. They were selected by Department of Corrections from a larger sample of youth sentenced as juveniles to adult prisons, but they were similar to the sample in juvenile facilities in terms of the procedures utilized to commit them to an adult facility by the county court. Department staff selected the sample for interviews from among those who would be released within six months, but who had been committed as juvenile offenders. All of these youth had originally been charged as adults for offenses which were committed below the age of 17 years, the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction in Michigan. The median age for the first offense that led to an adult placement was 16 years.

The median age for this group was 24.3 years (range=21-29) at the time of the interview because most of them had recidivated once or twice following their first release from an adult prison. Their median number of placements prior to the prison in which they were interviewed was eleven. In many instances these youth had been in residential placements most of the time since their 15th year or earlier.

Although the respondents in juvenile placements and adult placements were comparable by the criteria of the larger study, that they were placed before 17 years of age and that they were being prepared for release within six months, they were different in several ways. First, the adult sample was older. Second, whereas the juvenile sample included youth who had been placed in facilities for very serious felonies, including murder, the sample of youth in adult facilities did not include youth who had life or very long sentences because the latter were ineligible for release. These non-comparability issues, however, were not of concern in this study, whose aim is to compare youth with and without incarcerated parents, and not to compare youth in the two settings.

The average interview required 90 minutes and included information about their family and neighborhood environment, education, court and residential experiences, health and social services received prior to and during their placements, discipline and control experiences, employment, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and adult offense history, arrests and court processing and preparation for re-entry. Assessments for depression, negative life events, coping patterns and discrimination were also administered at this time.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Among the youth who had parents who had been imprisoned, few could report the precise dates of their parents’ incarceration, but almost all recalled that it occurred while they were growing up during elementary or high school years. A few noted that parents were still incarcerated and one youth reported being in the same facility as his father.

# Cluster Analysis

For the analysis of the relationship between parental incarceration and social exclusion factors, cluster analysis was preferred to regression or factor analysis, as cluster analysis groups by respondents whereas the latter methods group by variable. The sample of youth was homogeneous in the sense that all had committed serious crimes in Michigan, but the mix of disadvantages they experienced is likely heterogeneous and cumulative, and does not necessarily reside in one particular type of disadvantage. Hence, even though having parents with incarceration history is correlated with other types of disadvantages, there may not be significant correlations with individual factors, e.g. parental separation or neighborhood quality. The cluster analysis allows the data to call out these mixes (or clusters) of factors by putting more similar respondents together.

After some exploratory cluster analysis with two, three, and four clusters, three was felt to bring out clear distinct groups according the Social Exclusion variables. Four had too few cases in each cluster, and were not very distinct. Two gave groups that were not identifiable by the key variable, intergenerational incarceration. The results reported here are based on partition cluster analysis by mean k-distance was carried out in STATA 11. In partition cluster analysis, the research predefines the number of clusters, and the software program begins by choosing group centers. Then it assigns observations to the group with the closest center. The mean of the observations in each group is then computed as the new centers and the process iterated until no observations changed groups.

# Measures of Social Exclusion and Demographic Characteristics

The cluster analysis used a total of 12 variables (including parental incarceration) that represent the main exclusions adapted from Murray’s framework and which were available in our survey data set. To balance the magnitudes of the variables, the scales were standardized (i.e. converted into mean zero with one standard deviation). This made the scales comparable to one another, and also more comparable to the dichotomous variables, which were either 1 or 0. All scales gave values that were higher when the situation was worse. Any positive items were reverse coded.

Murray took the perspective of the prisoner, and how imprisonment affects their children. Our analysis took the perspective of the child, and how having at least one parent who has been incarcerated before correlates with other types of exclusion. We extracted from our data whatever we could find as instruments for five of Murray’s seven types of social exclusion. There were no variables from political and administration exclusion, and these two types of exclusion were also felt to be less directly relevant to sample youth at the time of interview. The pre-existing, and material and social capital loss exclusion were also re-categorized into three static categories: material capital, social capital, and other family background exclusion. In selecting variables to represent the types of social exclusion, we were mindful to keep the spread of the number of variables under each type of factor balanced. A description of the variables follows.

**Material capital –** The only variable here was whether the family received public assistance, food stamps, SSI etc. while growing up.

**Social capital –** The variables used under this category captures three key concepts.

1. As a measure of reduced parental monitoring, a scaled question was used on spending time outside of home without family members knowing where respondent was, where answers ranged from one for “never true” to 5 “very often true”.
2. To capture frequent moving, a dummy variable was used that equals one if respondent answered that while growing up, he or she moved “quite often” or “almost every year”.
3. As a proxy for living in a bad quality neighborhood, a scale was created from the sum of a set of six questions on neighborhood: the neighborhood as a good place to live; caring about what neighbors think; neighbors solving problems; religious organization important to respondent; participation in neighborhood activities; and children in neighborhood skipping school and getting into trouble. The answers were on a scale of 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree”. Five of six items were reverse coded.

**Other family background exclusion –** Four variables were included:

1. A dummy variable that equals one if the respondent did not have both biological parents while growing up.
2. A scale that summed ten negative life events questions related to the family: friends/family getting into gangs; family members getting on drugs; family having money problems; family members getting killed; arguing with family members; a parent dying; a sibling dying; parents getting divorced or separated; family member having trouble with alcohol; parent or relative getting very sick. Although a few items in the family negative life events might overlap with other variables included in the cluster analysis, it was felt that as a scale, the items would capture the cumulative effects of negative family events, and not one particular event.
3. A dummy variable that equals one if respondents’ parents were too drunk or high to take care of the family.
4. A dummy variable coded as one for ever being in foster care while growing up. Besides proxying for a factor in pre-existing exclusion, foster care can also proxy for the post-incarceration effects in Murray’s framework where children are placed in foster care due to a parent’s incarceration.

**Stigma –** We took the sum of nine questions that were answered are on a scale of 1 for “never” to 5 for “very often”. The questions included: treated with less courtesy; treated with less respect; received poorer service; called names or insulted; threatened or harassed; and people acted as if they thought respondent was not smart, dishonest, and as if they were afraid of respondent.

**Linguistic Exclusion –** For linguistic exclusion, Murray discussed how offenders are disadvantaged because they do not understand the processes and language of the courts. For our study, youth who have incarcerated parents might instead understand court processes better than youth who did not experience parental imprisonment. On the other hand, unless they have adequate legal representation, their behavior might be discounted in the court. We included in this category two variables:

1. The respondent understanding his/her legal rights while being questioned by the police; and
2. The respondents’ views on how fair they felt the court and their attorneys were. One hypothesis is that youth who have parents with court experience feel more negativity towards the court system, and so would rate more highly on this scale. The scale used was the sum of five questions on respondents’ perception of fair treatment, from 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree”. The items included: respondent’s attorney was more interested in closing the case than providing a strong defense; respondent’s attorney was a strong advocate for the respondent; the attorney seemed to work more for the court than the respondent; the attorney allowed the respondent to make the decision on what plea to enter; and the proceedings were fair.

**Dynamic Exclusion –** In Murray, dynamic exclusion refers to future disadvantages experienced by children of incarcerated parents. In the present study, dynamic exclusions are the outcomes of the youth respondents themselves. They are not inputs or correlates of parental incarceration. The dynamic exclusion variables were therefore used to compare rates of several outcomes of the youth by the different clusters. They were not used as items to create the clusters. Six youth outcomes were compared:

1. A dummy variable that was coded as one if the respondent had dropped out of school.
2. A dummy variable that equals one if the respondent had a child.
3. A five-point scale indicating the respondent’s grades in school, from mostly As to mostly failing.
4. Thirteen self and friends items in the negative life events questions, namely hassling by teachers; friends on drugs; trashed by people; threatened with guns; friends getting pregnant; friends getting locked up; gang membership; controlling partner; friends getting killed; caught in drug raids; close friend dying; and getting beaten.
5. A measure of drug abuse which is given the value 1 if the respondent used one of the following substances 40 or more times in their lifetime: marijuana or hashish; prescription drugs without prescription; cocaine, crack, heroine, or methamphetamine.
6. An indicator of depression that equaled one if the sum of 20 items from the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was 16 or above, with the CES-D scores ranging from 0 to 3.

Besides comparing clusters against the types of exclusion, several demographic variables were also compared. These provided base comparisons for the analysis in the sense that if differences varied by parental incarceration and social exclusion, but not demographic characteristics, the findings would lend salience to the co-existence of parental incarceration with other social exclusions. The demographic characteristics included indicators of whether the respondent was: (a) in adult or juvenile incarceration; (b) male or female; (c) of white ethnicity or not; and (d) had a home address in Wayne County, where Detroit and the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the state of Michigan was.

# Imputation of Missing Observations

Due to non-response, 23 respondents had missing data and were not clustered. This represented 25% of the data. Hence, besides a cluster analysis on the data as it was, and therefore excluding the respondents with missing information, a cluster analysis on imputed data was also carried out. Multiple imputation by the ICE command in STATA was implemented. This is an iterative method where the variables being imputed are regressed on a set of variables. At each iteration, a random error component is added and predicted values of the variable obtained. This is repeated until the results converge. Multiple imputations requires an assumption that the data is missing at random (MAR), which means that the probability that the variable is missing does not depend on the value of the variable after controlling for other variables.

In a typical multivariate analysis such as regression, several sets of imputed data would be generated to achieve pooled estimates with an efficient rate of missing data (Rubin, 1996). In cluster analysis, the choice of clusters is decided by the analyst. In this sense, there is no rule of thumb for the number of data sets. Five sets of data were arbitrarily generated, and several rounds of cluster analysis ran on all five sets until similar results were repeated. It turned out that the repeated results were also similar to those without imputation. All the variables used in the cluster analysis, except parental incarceration, were used in the multiple imputation.

Results

# Demographic characteristics of Analysis Sample

Of the 97 youth interviewed 51.2% were youth of color, over-representing the 32% of Michigan youth of color in their age category (Table 1). Only 14% were female, but that number is representative of the percentage of female youth committed to juvenile facilities and adult prisons in Michigan. Nearly three out of four (71%) grew up in single mother families. Overall 56% reported having an incarcerated father, 28% had an incarcerated mother, and 32% reported not having an incarcerated parent. The youth in adult prisons already had a total of 66 children of their own (53.1%), but few of them had contact with their own children on any regular basis.

[Table 1]

The median age at first arrest for this sample was 13.4 years and the age of commitment to a juvenile or adult facility for the crime what was the basis of the commitment was 16 years for the crime committed in conjunction with this study. With respect to the criminal offense, 60% overall were committed for person crimes; a large number among those in juvenile facilities were for sexual offenses, and among those in the prison, a large number were committed for “fleeing and resisting arrest.” However, most of the youth in both settings had a history of having been arrested several times and charged with a variety of offenses.

***Comparison by parental incarceration***

Before showing results by clusters, **Table 2** shows comparisons of the social exclusion variables and other demographic characteristics by whether respondent had at least a parent who had been incarcerated before. The results show that variable by variable, there were few significant differences. Among the social exclusion items only family negative life events, parents being too high or drunk, family being on public assistance, and self/friends negatively life events were significantly more so for youth with parental incarceration. Youth with no history of parental incarceration were instead more likely to have dropped out of high school. This result is not surprising, that educational disenfranchisement might have been related to these youth’s offending more so than youth who have the disadvantage of parental incarceration besides school problems. Among the demographic variables, youth who did not have a parent who had been incarcerated were more likely to be white and incarcerated in adult institutions.

[Table 2]

# Cluster Results

In repeated iterations of the cluster analysis, most results yielded clusters that had significantly different rates of parental incarceration **(Table 3)**. Reported here are results where cluster 1 has the lowest, cluster 2 has a moderate, and cluster 3 has the highest rate of parental incarceration. Results without imputation (columns 1-5) and with imputation (columns 6-9) are reported.

[Table 3]

Results were robust across models, and were similar with and without imputation. As cluster analysis requires all variables to have non-missing values, 23 respondents were not classified. The mean values of the variables among the unclassified group were either slightly higher or lower than the middle cluster with moderate rates of parental incarceration. Therefore, we believe that the assumption of missing at random (MAR), and as a result the application of multiple imputation is acceptable for this analysis.

While the comparison by parental incarceration in **Table 2** yielded only four exclusion factors significantly associated with parental incarceration, the cluster analysis shows significant differences among the low, medium, and high parental incarceration clusters for ten factors. Seven factors whose values were more negative as the rate of incarcerated parents increased included: % on PA while growing up; moved often; neighborhood quality; family negative life events scale; parents were too high or drunk to take care of family; % who were in foster care; and the discrimination scale. Values of three factors were more negative for the two clusters with higher rates of incarcerated parents than the cluster with the lowest rate of parental incarceration: nobody knew where the respondent was; self and friends negative life events scale; and % who were depressed.

There were another two statistically significant results, which however were not robust across models, and one result was in the opposite direction from expected. Clusters with higher rates of parental incarceration had significantly higher rates of youth who grew up without both biological parents in the imputed model, but not in the non-imputed model. The same was so for high school dropout, and in addition, it was clusters with higher parental incarceration that had lower dropout rates. The latter result was similar to that in Table 2.

Other differences were insignificant, and among demographic variables, there were significant differences in ethnic/racial profile, but not in a linear pattern. Those with medium rates of parental incarceration had the lowest percentages of whites. In summary, all the social exclusion types were significantly associated with higher rates of parental incarceration except “linguistic” exclusion, and the lack of significant differences by demographic characteristics all the more indicates the strong relationship between the social exclusions and parental incarceration.

Discussion

The study findings, that having incarcerated parents is associated with negative conditions experienced by sample incarcerated youth in juvenile and adult facilities in Michigan, are important today as the issue of mass imprisonment is addressed in the U.S. Use of Murray’s (2007) social exclusion framework was particularly helpful in the cluster analysis and produced clear clusters indicating the comorbidity between the disadvantage of parental incarceration and all of the types of social exclusion examined except “linguistic” exclusion. Murray suggests that offenders may experience social exclusion because they do not understand legal and court procedures and the law. We had hypothesized that sample youth who had parents who were ever imprisoned might instead have better knowledge and more negative perception of court procedures. The results showed insignificant differences between clusters with high rates of parental incarceration and other clusters. It looks like linguistic exclusion applies to offenders and their families in general. Whether they had parents who were ever incarcerated, the youth in this sample are a highly disadvantaged group. In fact, the majority of these offenders stated that they lacked adequate legal representation. Most courts in Michigan utilize court-appointed private contract attorneys, not public defenders who might have far more time to devote to the presentation of a case (Vandervort, 2001). In recent years, numerous cases have come before state and federal courts to challenge convictions because offenders lacked proper representation (Vandervort, 2001).

Clusters regarding social capital and material capital provide support for family resources, parental monitoring, and community conditions as important differences between youth with or without incarcerated parents. These youth engaged in many negative activities with peers, but they also lived in neighborhoods of declining quality and high mobility, as Testa and Furstenberg, 2002 and Sampson, et. al., 2002 have also documented.

Social exclusion because of family conditions in which these offenders grew up stand out and support the findings of most of previous research about the roles and behavior of the incarcerated parents in disadvantaging their children (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Cho, 2010; Eddy and Poehlmann, 2010; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004). The family “negative life events scale” highlights many of the family structures and behaviors that profoundly influence the lives of these youth, even at very early ages. For example, when most parents have a substance abuse problem, it might well be expected that this would be related to similar behavior by their children. Although the overwhelming majority of these youth grew up in single parent families, those with incarcerated parents fared more poorly in terms of negative life events and overall quality of life than those without this disadvantage. The Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have provided support for mentoring programs for these youth, and while the evaluation results show some positive outcomes, they also highlight the difficulties in serving these children of incarcerated parents effectively.

Youth outcomes as presented in the dynamic exclusion of Murray’s framework were not used as inputs to the cluster analysis, because they were viewed as outcomes to the different types of social exclusion related to their parents’ incarceration. . The differences in the clusters by percent with depression and a higher self and friends negative life event rating therefore suggest some intergenerational effects of parental incarceration. Our sample of very disadvantaged youth was incarcerated for serious crimes and had experienced many out-of-home placements because of their delinquent behavior. They all tend to be homogenous in terms of academic and behavior problems, but the background to their incarceration differs, and the group with parents who were or had been incarcerated tended to also experience other types of disadvantages, such as serious substance abuse. Services targeted for this population are urgently needed if the United States is to reduce the intergenerational effects of incarceration. We observed that substantial percentages of these youth grew up in single parent families, were on public assistance and in foster care. Many moved from foster care to residential placements and then to correctional institutions. With such early problematic careers, it can be anticipated that they will experience a life of custody and dependency.

Is parental incarceration correlated with outcomes for their children? Our findings provide substantial support that they do and when we consider that 53.1% of the respondents in this study had children themselves despite their young age, one cannot help but be pessimistic about their children’s future outcomes unless there is significant positive intervention. Moreover, a majority of the male respondents with children indicated that they expected to have little future contact with their children, preventing them from being a positive influence in their lives. Far too little is being done to counsel and train parents who are or have been incarcerated about the ways in which they could help prevent another generation’s incarceration (Eddy & Poehlman, 2010).

# Policy and Program Agenda

Overall, the results indicate that the majority of these youth are likely to have troubled and unsuccessful lives unless there is significant intervention to provide them with safe and supportive living conditions, substantial education, viable employment experience and adequate housing. All of the respondents were adults when they were released and had spent many years in various types of foster care or institutions. They urgently needed intensive and effective reintegration services, but these were largely unavailable. What might be done to reduce intergenerational incarceration? Our review of the literature along with our own findings suggest that there are several interventions that could be undertaken which have been shown to be effective and are far less costly. Criminal justice policies that call for high levels of incarceration of parents, as exists in the United States, deserve reexamination and where appropriate, replacement with community-based programs that support parents fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Effective community treatment has long been shown to produce far better long-term outcomes for parents and children (Loper and Turek, 2006).

Since 2000, Wayne County, Michigan, has moved away from primary reliance on residential placement of delinquent youth and is primarily working with them in their family homes and in the community. Recidivism data of the youth served in the community is far more positive than it was when they relied primarily on out-of-home residential placements (Chaney, 2010). Moreover, the majority of youth are African American and live in a city with one of the highest child poverty rates in the United States, but its model of responding to delinquency has substantially reduced the incarceration of youth.

Some promising results are being reported of parenting training and support for adults in the justice system so that they can assist with the care of their children while they are incarcerated. Visitation and frequent telephoning have been shown to be effective in maintaining relationships and parental roles [[3]](#footnote-2). Improved legal services are needed for both adult and juvenile offenders to provide more effective defense and alternative dispositions to incarceration of parents or youth when community-based placements have been shown to be as effective. For those youth who are incarcerated and who have an incarcerated parent or family member, special intervention is needed that helps them deal with incarceration and its consequences more effectively, because some may expect incarceration as inevitable when parents or other relatives have also been incarcerated (Wilson, 2009).

# Research Agenda

This study of intergenerational incarceration is part of a larger research project that was designed to assess the variable preparation of juveniles in the juvenile system for community return versus similar youth sentenced to the adult system. Only when examining the data were the very high levels of intergenerational incarceration observed among these youth. It is clear now that much further research on this topic is urgently needed as Murray and Farrington (2008) suggested in their extensive review of the literature. It is also apparent that we need to know more about the critical early events in the lives of children of the incarcerated so as to identify possible points for intervention and treatment. Far too little is known about the impact on children from their parent(s) incarceration so further research is urgently needed because it is a growing and serious problem with long term negative effects. As Murray (2007) and Phillips, et. al. (2006) have argued, we need carefully constructed longitudinal studies that can disentangle the effects of parental imprisonment on children from the effects from the pre-existing disadvantages in their families and neighborhoods. Fathers are far more likely to be incarcerated than mothers, but much more is needed to be known about the effects on children and family life of their absence due to incarceration.

One area that longitudinal studies can track is the problem of “child welfare drift”. This was not explored in this article, but an important research question is whether there is a higher probability of experiencing “child welfare drift” when a child’s parent or parents are incarcerated. Among the sample, four youth who did not have a formal delinquency record had ended up in secure juvenile correctional facilities. They were long-term child welfare clients whose parental rights had been terminated and who ended up in these facilities by default. Recent research has shown that a substantial percentage of child welfare youth end up in the justice system both before and after they “age out” of the child welfare system (Courtney, 2010).

Yet another area for urgent research and intervention is the over-representation of youth of color in the justice system. There was a higher rate of youth of color in our sample than the general youth population in Michigan. However, the cluster relationships between parental incarceration and race were non-linear and statistically insignificant. Longitudinal studies could help to piece together the experiences of different groups of minority youth in relation to parents’ imprisonment and other types social exclusion.

In the U.S. mass incarceration policies have impacted the society as well as families. Prior to the rapid increase in incarceration since the l980s, most offenders, adult and juvenile, were supervised in the community. Today, we need comparative research that examines the outcomes for children as well as for their parents from community-based interventions and alternatives to incarceration for the parents. Such knowledge could provide the basis for a return to more socially effective policies.

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**Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Incarcerated Youth**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Youth of Color | 51.2% |
| Female | 14.0% |
| Grew up in single Mother family | 71% |
| Median age – 1st arrest | 13.4 |
| Median age entering adult prison as Juvenile | 16.0 |
| Father incarcerated | 56% |
| Mother incarcerated | 28% |
| Commitment offense – Person Crime | 60% |
|  |  |

**Table 2. Summary Statistics of Variables in Cluster Analysis**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | At least one parent incarcerated | | | |  | No parent incarcerated | | | |
|  | Mean | SD | % | N |  | Mean | SD | % | N |
| **Material exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % whose family was on PA while growing up\* |  |  | 71.67% | 43 |  |  |  | 45.45% | 15 |
| **Social capital exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| “I spent time out of the house and no one knew where I was” | 3.93 | 1.28 | 33 | 59 |  | 3.82 | 1.38 |  | 33 |
| % who moved quite often or at almost once a year |  |  | 41.94% | 26 |  |  |  | 35.43% | 11 |
| Neighbourhood quality scale | 14.69 | 4.58 |  | 59 |  | 13.48 | 4.31 |  | 33 |
| **Other family background exclusion** | | | | | | | | | |
| % who grew up without both biological parents |  |  | 88.52% | 54 |  |  |  | 78.79% | 26 |
| Family negative life events scale \*\* | 6.01 | 1.81 |  | 60 |  | 4.30 | 1.92 |  | 33 |
| “My parents were too drunk or high to take care of my family” \*\* | 2.14 | 1.5 |  | 59 |  | 1.27 | .76 |  | 33 |
| % ever been in foster care\* |  |  | 48.33% | 29 |  |  |  | 24.24% | 8 |
| **Stigma** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Discrimination scale | 23.93 | 7.04 |  | 59 |  | 21.59 | 7.84 |  | 32 |
| **Linguistic exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Extent did not understand legal rights | 2.82 | 1.64 |  | 51 |  | 2.26 | 1.63 |  | 31 |
| Court fairness scale (1-25) | 15.70 | 5.67 |  | 57 |  | 18.20 | 1.04 |  | 30 |
| **Dynamic exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % who had dropped out of high school\* |  |  | 40% | 22 |  |  |  | 67.86% | 19 |
| % who have a child\*\* |  |  | 31.67% | 19 |  |  |  | 31.25% | 10 |
| Self and friends negative life events | 7.8 | 2.62 |  | 60 |  | 6.52 | 3.00 |  | 33 |
| Grade in school | 3.16 | 1.19 |  | 58 |  | 3.0 | 1.4 |  | 33 |
| % who abused substances |  |  | 61.67% | 37 |  |  |  | 74.19% | 23 |
| % who are depressed |  |  | 51.61% | 32 |  |  |  | 48.48% | 16 |
| **Demographic characteristics** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % in adult incarceration\*\* |  |  | 38.71% | 24 |  |  |  | 75.76% | 25 |
| % who are white\* |  |  | 33.87% | 21 |  |  |  | 59.38% | 19 |
| % who are from Wayne county |  |  | 24.19% | 15 |  |  |  | 21.21% | 7 |
| % who are female |  |  | 11.29% | 7 |  |  |  | 15.15% | 5 |

Notes:

Differences between those with at least one parent incarcerated and those with no incarcerated parent statistically significant at \* 5%, \*\* 1%.

**Table 3. Clusters with 12 variables, with and without imputation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | No imputation | | | | |  | Imputed | | | |
|  | (1)  Cluster 1:  Low parental incarceration  (N=27) | (2)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=32) | (3)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=13) | (4)  p-value | (5)  Not clustered  (N=23) |  | (6)  Cluster 1: low parental incarceration  (N=34) | (7)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=38) | (8)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=20) | (9)  p-value |
| % with at least one parent in prison before | 44.44%  (50.64) | 62.50%  (49.19) | 92.31%  (27.74) | .014\*\* | 73.91%  (44.90) |  | 48.65%  (50.67) | 65.79%  (48.08) | 90%  (30.78) | .008\*\* |
| **Material exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % whose family was on PA while growing up | 29.63%  (46.53) | 68.75%  (47.09) | 84.62%  (37.55) | .001\*\* | 77.27%  (42.89) |  | 45.95%  (50.52) | 65.79%  (48.08) | 80%  (41.04) | .031\* |
| **Social capital exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| “I spent time out of the house and no one knew where I was” (1-5) | 2.96  (1.40) | 4.41  (.84) | 3.85  (1.46) | .0001\*\* | 4.33  (1.06) |  | 3.41  (1.44) | 4.5  (.83) | 3.7  (1.34) | .0006\*\* |
| % who moved quite often or at almost once a year | 18.52%  (39.58) | 43.75%  (50.40) | 76.92%  (43.85) | .002\*\* | 33.33%  (48.30) |  | 21.62%  (41.73) | 39.47%  (49.54) | 70%  (47.02) | .002\*\* |
| Neighbourhood quality scale (1-6) | 10.85  (3.38) | 15.50  (3.54) | 18.38  (4.77) | .00\*\* | 14.05  (3.92) |  | 11.51  (3.56) | 15.63  (3.47) | 16.56  (5.16) | .00\*\* |
| **Other family background exclusion** | | | | | | | | | | |
| % who grew up without both biological parents | 70.37%  (46.53) | 93.75%  (24.59) | 84.62%  (37.55) | .056 | 95.65%  (20.85) |  | 75.68%  (43.50) | 94.74%  (22.63) | 90%  (30.78) | .048\* |
| Family negative life events scale (0-10) | 4.11  (1.83) | 5.78  (1.68) | 6.92  (1.32) | .00\*\* | 5.45  (2.26) |  | 4.03  (1.85) | 6.18  (1.66) | 6.47  (1.55)\*\* | .00\*\* |
| “My parents were too drunk or high to take care of my family” (1=never true to 5=very often true) | 1.15  (.46) | 1.28  (.63) | 4.23  (.73) | .00\*\* | 2  (1.48) |  | 1.11  (.39) | 1.26  (.60) | 4.1  (.85)\*\* | .00\*\* |
| % ever been in foster care | 22.22%  (42.37) | 37.50%  (49.19) | 69.23%  (48.04) | .016\* | 45.45%  (50.97) |  | 21.62%  (41.73) | 42.11%  (50.04) | 65%  (48.94) | .005\*\* |

**Table 3 (cont’d). Clusters with 12 variables, with and without imputation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | No imputation | | | | |  | Imputed | | | |
|  | (1)  Cluster 1:  Low parental incarceration  (N=27) | (2)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=32) | (3)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=13) | (4)  p-value | (5)  Not clustered  (N=23) |  | (6)  Cluster 1: low parental incarceration  (N=34) | (7)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=38) | (8)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=20) | (9)  p-value |
| **Stigma** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Discrimination scale (1-39) | 17.22  (6.39) | 26.22  (5.39) | 28.69 (5.38) | .00\* | 22.5  (7.02) |  | 17.00  (5.45) | 26.76  (5.47) | 27.83  (5.06) | .00\*\* |
| **Linguistic exclusion** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Extent did not understand legal rights | 3.30  (1.61) | 3.47  (1.68) | 3.62  (1.76) | .84 | 3.18  (1.66) |  | 2.85  (1.65) | 2.39  (1.62) | 2.5  (1.71) | .51 |
| Court fairness scale (1-25) | 16.11  (6.42) | 17.03  (5.57) | 18.92  (4.87) | .36 | 14.06  (5.20) |  | 16.13  (5.68) | 16.88  (6.00) | 17.44  (5.72) | .70 |
| **Youth outcomes (Dynamic exclusion)** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % who had dropped out of high school | 44.00%  (50.66) | 56.00%  (50.66) | 50%  (52.22) | .70 | 45.45%  (50.96) |  | 37.14%  (49.02) | 66.67%  (47.94) | 42.11%  (50.73) | .048\* |
| % who have a child | 25.93%  (44.66) | 46.88%  (50.70) | 30.77%  (48.04) | .23 | 13.04%  (34.44) |  | 24.32%  (43.50) | 39.47%  (49.54) | 25%  (44.43) | .30 |
| Self and friends negative life events (1-14) | 5.63  (2.76) | 8.09  (2.44) | 8.85  (1.95) | .0001\*\* | 7.23%  (3.10) |  | 5.68  (2.56) | 8.34  (2.45) | 8.32  (2.79) | .00\*\* |
| Grade in school (1-5) | 2.80  (1.04) | 3.31  (1.18) | 3.38%  (1.50) | .21 | 3.05  (1.13) |  | 2.97  (1.07) | 3.32  (1.18) | 3  (1.38) | .40 |
| % who abused substances | 62.96  (49.21) | 75.00%  (43.99) | 69.23%  (48.04) | .61 | 43.48%  (50.59) |  | 59.46%  (49.77) | 68.42%  (47.11) | 60%  (50.26) | .69 |
| % who are depressed | 29.63%  (46.53) | 59.38%  (49.90) | 69.23%  (48.04) | .023\* | 39.13%  (49.90) |  | 24.32%  (43.50) | 63.16%  (48.89) | 60%  (50.26) | .002\*\* |

**Table 3 (cont’d). Clusters with 12 variables, with and without imputation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | No imputation | | | | |  | Imputed | | | |
|  | (1)  Cluster 1:  Low parental incarceration  (N=27) | (2)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=32) | (3)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=13) | (4)  p-value | (5)  Not clustered  (N=23) |  | (6)  Cluster 1: low parental incarceration  (N=34) | (7)  Cluster 2: Medium parental incarceration  (N=38) | (8)  Cluster 3:  High parental incarceration  (N=20) | (9)  p-value |
| **Demographic** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| % in adult incarceration | 59.26%  (50.07) | 62.50%  (49.19) | 53.85%  (51.89) | .86 | 26.09%  (44.90) |  | 51.35%  (50.67) | 57.89%  (50.04) | 40%  (50.26) | .43 |
| % who are white | 50%  (50.99) | 37.50%  (49.19) | 76.92%  (43.85) | .06 | 26.09%  (44.90) |  | 47.22%  (50.63) | 28.95%  (45.96) | 65%  (48.94) | .027\* |
| % who are from Wayne county | 22.22%  (42.37) | 21.88%  (42.00) | 7.69%  (27.74) | .50 | 30.43%  (47.05) |  | 21.62%  (41.73) | 26.32%  (44.63) | 15%  (36.63) | .61 |
| % who are female | 11.11%  (32.03) | 9.38%  (29.61) | 0 | .47 | 21.74%  (42.74) |  | 10.81%  (31.48) | 15.79%  (36.95) | 5%  (22.36) | .47 |

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2. The procedures and instruments for this study were all approved by the Behavioral Science Institution Review Board (IRB) of the University of Michigan on 4/22/06 followed by periodic reviews until the study was completed in 2008. A privacy certificate was obtained from the National Institute of Child Health and Human development on 7/28/06 to assure proper procedures and to protect staff and respondents. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Minnesota has established several visitation programs for children of incarcerated mothers. They arrange for overnight stays for children and they also instruct women offenders about appropriate ways in which to communicate with their children (Minnesota, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)